

# Over-Thinking Your Life



It is healthy to be reflective, self-aware and perceptive, as these traits can serve to improve your relationships and help you to reach your goals. However, if you have an analytical mind, it is all too easy to become an over-thinker who is consumed by anxious thoughts that spiral out of control.

Do you catch yourself scrutinizing the words and actions of people in your life, second-guessing your first interpretations and convincing yourself that you have detected negative subtext? Alternatively, are you guilty of spending too much time dwelling on the past, re-examining past failures and obsessing over what went wrong? The following tips will help you to strike the right balance between being a conscientious, responsible thinker and over-thinking to the point that it is detrimental to your happiness.

## **1) Understand that over-thinking can lead to self-sabotage:**

It is helpful to note that there is concrete evidence of the serious problems caused by over-thinking, as this knowledge may help to make you feel more motivated to find ways to break free. For example, recent research suggests that constantly replaying problems from the past can often mean allowing the negativity involved in these memories to influence your future success. People who engage in this type of behavior are often called 'ruminators', and a professor of psychology at the University of California has found that they are commonly stuck in self-destructive patterns. Obsessing over an imagined insult can lead to performing poorly at work, convincing you that you are bad at your job and serving to encourage yet more negative ruminating. Similarly, pause to consider how many times you have ended up arguing with a loved one after second-guessing the meaning behind something that has been said. On reflection, it should be clear that even though self-preservation is the goal of over-thinking, self-sabotage is the more common result.

## **2) Make use of a journal:**

For some, the practice of over-thinking is strongly linked to a need to be heard. Although a journal won't talk back, you can be completely honest about all of your thoughts and feelings when you are writing in it, and this act may help to silence your racing thoughts. Allow

yourself twenty minutes to sort through your ideas and feelings in the journal, and then tell yourself it is time to move on.

### **3) Catch yourself:**

If your mind starts to send you down the dangerous path of over-thinking, stop it before it goes too far. For example, when you receive a text message from a friend and the punctuation makes you wonder if she is angry at you, this can easily lead you to assume that you have done something wrong and then leave you spending hours wondering how many friends are annoyed by your personality. Instead of allowing this to happen, tell yourself that you will withhold judgment about your friend's attitude until there is more evidence, and move on to an activity that helps to change your train of thought. Ideal examples include reading an absorbing novel, watching your favorite TV show or engaging in an exercise routine. Often, you will find that physical activities encourage you to step out of your own mind.

### **4) Take action instead of obsessing:**

Over-thinkers are often paralyzed by indecision, so you can also help yourself to break free of over-thinking by making a commitment to face issues head-on. If you are worried that your spouse is unsatisfied with your relationship, don't allow this to turn into days spent thinking about all the reasons why you were bound to be a disappointed to any romantic partner. Even if keeping a detailed journal does not appeal to you, you may find it helpful to at least write down the basics of your problem when brainstorming solutions. Make a list, zero in on the most positive way to tackle the issue, and act.

### **5) Engage in cognitive restructuring:**

Cognitive restructuring involves challenging your usual ways of thinking and cultivating new ones. For example, if you usually leap to explain the confusing or hurtful behavior of others by looking at your own faults, challenge yourself to come up with alternative explanations. Perhaps your partner was irritable this morning because he was worried about an intimidating meeting at work, and maybe your sister sounded strange when she cancelled this afternoon's lunch plans because she is embarrassed to admit that she is afraid to thwart her attempts to lose weight. With some practice, quickly generating a wide range of logical scenarios can become the norm, and paranoid over-analysis can be left behind.

### **6) Focus on the bigger picture:**

When you feel the urge to over-think, it can be helpful to take a step back and view the situation from a more objective perspective (in order to judge its true importance). For example, if you are obsessing over what will happen if you choose not to attend a certain social event this week, ask yourself whether it will matter to you (or anyone else) in a week, a month, or a year. This process often helps to illustrate that the decision under consideration is actually more minor than it first appeared.

### **7) Teach yourself to let go of the past:**

While it is instructive to draw lessons from life when things go badly, it is unhealthy to spend too much time dwelling on upsetting incidents from the past. If a relationship comes to an end, you argue with a family member or have a problem at work, think about it only to the extent required to grasp what went wrong and to understand what you can do to avoid similar issues in the future. After that, forgive yourself for your part in the negative event, and turn your thoughts elsewhere.

### **8) Learn how to meditate:**

Finally, by cultivating the skills required to meditate, you equip yourself with a powerful way to calm your mind. Learning to meditate typically begins with basic breathing exercises and

then moves on to visualization techniques that focus on helping you to picture peaceful environments that still your thoughts. Alternatively, you might try creating a 'happy place' that you can mentally visit when you begin to feel trapped in unproductive loops of negative thinking. For example, you might picture walking in a quiet, sunlit forest, or imagine relaxing on a beach.

Although over-thinking can dramatically increase stress levels and start to dominate your life, the above suggestions highlight the fact that it is possible to overcome this habit and develop a healthier approach. However, if you make sustained efforts to stop over-thinking and you find that you are still struggling, seeing a counselor or therapist may be helpful. Sometimes, it is easier to make productive changes to your behavior if an expert is there to provide feedback and encouragement.

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